

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

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"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

It is Commencement weekend here at Augsburg, always a moment of immense pride and joy as we send our students forth on their vocational journeys. This particular weekend has been made even more special by the announcement that we have surpassed the capital campaign goal of \$50 million to build the Center for Science, Business and Religion, a truly transformative building for our community. Here is a link to the newspaper story about the announcement:

<http://www.startribune.com/local/minneapolis/302259421.html>

As I've said often in these past few days, I now go from talking to donors to talking with architects and construction folks. That is a happy transition as we now begin our work on making this signature academic building a reality by 2018.

Occasionally, I (or my colleagues) refer to items from previous issues of Notes. If you have not been a subscriber previously, and wish to review our conversations, past issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com. The website version of Notes also includes helpful hyperlinks to sources for purchasing or subscribing to the various publications mentioned in Notes. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>You honor us<<

Here is a brief excerpt from my Honors Convocation address to our students, giving you a glimpse of one of the central themes of our work at Augsburg – imagining not how we find students who are “college-ready” (a familiar refrain in higher ed circles), but how we are a college that is “student-ready”!

“A few weeks ago, a guest instructor in the Honors 490 senior seminar that I co-teach with Garry Hesser and Jay Walljasper asked our good students why they were in the class. There were the predictable (and perfectly appropriate) responses about requirements and the cool immersion trip to Chicago that is part of the course. But a couple of the students commented that they took the class in part because they wanted to have the President of the College as an instructor – which, as they rightly noted, is rare. But as I thought about their kind sentiment, I was struck by how much I value the experience I have with our students in their last semester at Augsburg – how meaningful it is to be a co-learner in the course, how proud I am of what students aspire to accomplish in their lives.

And that is the turn I want to make in my remarks to you on this special occasion. Even as we gather here today to honor and celebrate you, I want to boldly proclaim that each of you honors us, honors our community, honors the world as you have lived out our mission with exceptional intellect, hard work, and moral passion in the classroom, on campus, in the neighborhood and around the world. You honor us.

As I reflect on all that you have accomplished these past several years, I am struck by how Augsburg is made and remade over and over again by the generations of students who have come to this campus to be educated, to meet friends and colleagues for life, to gain the skills and attitude and commitments that will make a life and shape the world, even to discern their callings and find a path forward in their vocational journeys. Our vision statement for Augsburg says that we will be a “new kind of student-centered, urban university, small to our students and big for the world.” And there is, in this aspiration for Augsburg’s future, a clear reverence for our past wherein students have always come to the college, engaged their peers, faculty and staff, and remade this community – remade it to be more mission-focused, more true to its values and commitments, more relevant to the world that so needs our care and compassion.

In this way, Augsburg counters the elitist claim that students ought to be “college-ready” and instead dedicates itself to what our colleague Harry Boyte in the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship calls being a college that is “student-ready!” How about that for turning higher education on its head? We aspire to be student ready and each of you has shown us why that is important as you have pursued your life and work in the community.

I thank each of you for what you’ve done for Augsburg in your time here – in the classroom, laboratory, on athletic fields and performance stages, in the neighborhood and around the world – you’ve made Augsburg stronger and more faithful. You’ve helped build up one of the most robust and successful undergraduate research programs in the country. You’ve won national and international recognition for your scholarship and service. You’ve committed yourself to our nearby neighborhoods, tutoring and serving meals and building community. You’ve taught us about privilege and challenged our community to name its biases and embrace otherness and difference. You’ve stood up for marriage equality and voter rights. You’ve fought for justice, on and off campus. You’ve delighted us with theater and music and athletic prowess. You’ve shared your hearts and minds and spirits with a community that now bears your marks. And that is honorable work – work that honors us.”

>>Promises, Promises<<

I preached the following homily in our chapel earlier this semester.

Scripture assigned: Jeremiah 30: 12-22

I have joined this Lenten season with hundreds of members of my South Minneapolis church in a 365 day read through the Bible initiative. We started on Ash Wednesday two weeks ago and will finish the entire Bible – old and new testaments – by mid-February 2016. So far, so good – I’m keeping up. Despite all my years of theological training, I’ve never read the Bible through cover-to-cover. You’ll likely hear about this effort again in the months ahead as I won’t have much additional time for sermon preparation...

My early observations, now through the book of Genesis and just into Exodus, is just how full these early pages of the Hebrew Bible are with promises, promises – and more promises. We've got promises between God and Adam and Eve, and then with Noah and Abram/Abraham and Sarah, with Isaac and Jacob/Israel and Joseph. We've got promises between these various characters and the myriad other good folks named in Genesis. And these are not only promises made and kept. But these are promises made and then broken, then made again, with perhaps a few acts of deceit thrown in to make things interesting, and then made again. You get the idea. This is a complex and complicated and messy set of relationships, depicted in all their mundane and ordinary details.

I think there is, in my experience of reading about these early days of God's engagement with God's people, an incredibly powerful lesson for our Lenten journeys – a lesson we 21st century faithful tend to overlook in our often jaded and cynical perspectives on life in the world. All over the book of Genesis, we have the story of God in conversation with God's people. God is there and here and there, paying attention, watching over, talking with the various characters, personally engaging in the business of promise-making and keeping. God is here and there and here – here, in our midst, talking with us, making and keeping promises, paying attention when we succeed and fail, when we get it and don't, when we prosper and suffer, when we are in need and self-sufficient. What do you think of that possibility, my fellow faithful? Are you talking back, paying attention, making and keeping your promises?

Our assigned scripture for this morning comes from one of my favorite Old Testament books, the prophet Jeremiah. It is a later tale in the saga of God's chosen people, set against the background of the Babylonian exile, when the temple and city of Jerusalem have been destroyed, the Israelites have been exiled to Babylon, and to be quite honest, this whole promise-making and keeping dynamic is being tested. Our passage articulates this tension pretty clearly. On the one hand, the Lord first proclaims, this is not looking good for you. "Your hurt is incurable, your wound is grievous. There is no one to uphold your cause...All your lovers have forgotten you...your guilt is great...I have done these things to you." Ouch, we might say.

But then, on the turn of a phrase, redemption is at hand. Despite all of this sin and sadness and captivity, you are still my people and I will restore health to you. "I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings...the city shall be rebuilt...Out of them shall come thanksgiving...I will make them many and honored." And then these remarkable words, "And you shall be my people, and I will be your God."

Words that are emblazoned on the hearts and minds of all God's faithful. *You are my people and I am your God.* The abiding promise of our awesome God.

So, how are we to understand this God, our God, who stays with us, no matter what? How do we make sense of this God who speaks with us in our 21st century lives? I think part of the challenge for those of us who read these Old Testament stories from a Christian perspective is that the filter of the cross and resurrection sometimes leads us to forget that the relationship between God and God's people is not completed on Good Friday and Easter, rather it is renewed and redeemed so that we can return freed to listen to God, to the promises made and kept in the midst of all the messiness, to the work we called to do on behalf of God's people and world.

To this end, returning to the experience of the Israelites and their ongoing engagement with God offers us helpful glimpses into what our God expects when promises are made and kept (or made

and broken and made again...) And in those glimpses, we also have a roadmap for the ways we might engage each other in this community and in the neighborhood.

God's promises are, first of all, always marked by generosity of spirit and means. God doesn't hold back for God's people. From the wonders of all creation to the lush garden of Eden to the seeds of renewed life on the Ark to the abiding protection of God's people living in alien lands, God does not leave God's people comfortless or without what they need to survive and prosper. In our promises to each other, how are we being generous with each other, sharing all that we have so that we might prosper together?

Second, God's promises are characterized by a bias toward reconciliation and forgiveness. Think about Adam and Eve – there were consequences for their breaking the promise in Eden, but God never abandons them. How about Abram – he laughed at God when promised offspring, but God keeps his promises nonetheless. And then there's Jacob, who steals his brother's birthright and blessing, only to become the progenitor of all of Israel. Are we the forgiving kind? Do we leave our sins at the altar and live as those reconciled to each other, no matter what?

Finally, God's promises are rooted in hope and in the patience that hope requires in a world full of evidence that runs counter to God's intentions for God's people. This is one of the most remarkable things I have found in my daily Bible readings from the Pentateuch. God doesn't give up on us. God didn't give up on the chosen people in the wilderness or in exile. God doesn't give up on humanity before the flood. God doesn't give up on Abram and Sarai, or Isaac, or Jacob. But in order to understand such a powerful message of hope in the Lord, we also must embrace the patience that doesn't seek immediate gratification, that doesn't allow the ways of the world to define a path forward, that enables us to let God's will emerge in God's time. Do we have the long view of God's reign breaking in? Do we have the patience to abide in our promises to each other, even when it seems that God's will is not being done?

Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen reminds us in his *Bread for the Journey* that:

Patience is a hard discipline. It is not just waiting until something happens over which we have no control: the arrival of a bus...the resolution of a conflict. Patience is not a waiting passivity...Patience asks us to live the moment to the fullest, to be completely present to the moment...to be where we are. When we are impatient we try to get away from where we are. We behave as if the real thing will happen tomorrow, later, and somewhere else. Let's be patient and trust that the treasure we look for is hidden in the ground on which we stand.

Promises, promises. Lord, I believe – help my unbelief, we pray this Lenten season. Everyday on this campus, in this neighborhood, in the world, we make and keep promises to each other, we break promises and make them again, we seek to be God's people and do God's work in this place. May we find in the stories of God's people through the ages the lessons of generosity, reconciliation, hope and patience – lessons of our God who is here, speaking with us, staying with us, paying attention to us, keeping this remarkable promise: *You are my people and I am your God.* Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Do this<<

I preached the following homily in our chapel on Maundy Thursday (just before Easter).

Scripture assigned: I Corinthians 11: 23-26, John 13: 31b-35

I was about to enter my first Lenten season as pastor of First Lutheran Church, and as was my custom, I called my experienced pastor dad to get some tips. He didn't have much to say except for these two suggestions: on Ash Wednesday, make sure that you keep a damp cloth nearby when imposing the ashes, because they are a real mess; and on Maundy Thursday be sure to recruit at least one volunteer for the foot-washing, otherwise you might be standing there for a long time with no feet to wash!

At the moment, those good (and very helpful) tips seemed pretty mundane, but in retrospect I wonder if dad wasn't offering me a pretty profound summary of the meaning of Lent – and indeed, of the life of faith...

On Ash Wednesday, we are marked with the ashes as a sign of our mortality, our brokenness – we remember that we have come from dust and to dust we shall return – we acknowledge the messiness of our lives (messiness that a damp cloth cannot begin to undo)

And today, on this day we call Maundy Thursday, the first of the three days of Easter, we are offered glimpses of how God's promise to us has been fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus, who prepares to leave us by offering us an example, by asking us to remember him, by giving us a commandment for living once he is gone – and we don't quite know what to do with all that – we sometimes have trouble remembering – we certainly won't volunteer to have our feet washed!

Our task together this morning – gathered as God's people – is to remember and to hear the commandment again. This odd word "Maundy," from the Latin *mandatum*, translated as mandate or commandment. And this beautiful, elegant phrase we hear in our communion liturgy each week: "Do this in remembrance of me." This is how we commence the three days of Easter: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. Do this – live as I have lived – in remembrance of me. Listen to the voice of Jesus –welcoming us at table, teaching us to love, perhaps even pleading with us to remember. The pleading of our Lord who is about to die a horrible death. Do this, my brothers and sisters in faith.

Do this. Gather together around the table to enjoy the fellowship, to receive forgiveness, to know your Lord in the breaking of bread and sipping of drink. This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you. Be joyful. I still watch with wonder as our children, Thomas and Maya, now come to the Lord's table. I see their gleeful expressions as they receive the sacrament. Oh that we could remember and rekindle such joy. Whenever you come together at this table, for this supper, I will be with you, Jesus tells his disciples and us. Be happy – enjoy each others' company – celebrate, perhaps even dance a bit. Here is the bread and the cup, broken for you, shed for you – for your salvation. Do this in remembrance of me.

Do this. Wash the dust from each others' feet. Be servants to each other. Enter into the intimacy and grace of relationship with each other. Other than my three or four years of washing feet with my flock in Indiana, I hadn't much heard anyone talk about footwashing until a few years ago when one of our Presidential scholar prospective students, in response to a question about meaningful leadership experiences, recounted a retreat where adult counselors had washed the feet of the youth participants. She said when they were finished, she and a young friend proceeded to return the favor to the counselors, which made the entire ritual incredibly moving and grace-filled. That is how

it works. Do this. Serve each other in the most concrete ways – return the favor. Live this way. Do this.

Do this. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Remember me as you love one another, Jesus tells his disciples. This is how you must live as I depart from you. Do not forget. I witness such love in our college community each and every day, as we teach and serve and care for each other – as we do the Lord’s work in our neighborhood and world – as we are sent forth to be God’s faithful people in our various callings.

I’ve taught you how, Jesus reminds us. Gather at table, wash each others’ feet, love one another. And when the meal is finished, go from here with these words in your hearts and minds, to be my disciples in all you say and do. This is how the world will know you as mine. Do this. These, then, are God’s gifts to God’s faithful people. A commandment, to love one another. A table, at which to gather and remember. A covenant, to forgive and redeem. Do this – gather, serve and love – in remembrance of me. God keep you in these three days. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>The architecture of our lives<<

In line with my earlier comments about talking with architects about our new building at Augsburg, I return to a favorite piece I wrote many years ago about what I learned from an architect about his craft.

“For my birthday last month, I received five beautifully framed prints of historic institutions of higher learning in the US – the College of William and Mary, Harvard, Columbia, Yale, and Dartmouth. I thought of those collegiate scenes when I heard a local architect suggest that he thought of architecture as the celebration of space. Colleges are often remarkable celebrations of space – in ways that perhaps expand our understanding of the architecture of our lives.

The same local architect talked about his work in three helpful categories.

First, architecture is a vocation, a calling. In a recent article in *Preservation* (January/February 2003), author Michael Byers describes a visit to the Mall in Washington, DC and suggests that the various monuments there – all architectural icons – attest to our better natures. As he navigates the mall, commenting on the quality of each monument’s design and function, Byers reminds us that, at its best, architecture challenges us to face the truth that “I am a participant in a world civilization, I have history entrusted to me, we are all in this together.” Who can stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in the shadow of the mighty columns, beneath the inscribed “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right...”, where King spoke and Anderson sang – and not feel the call?

Second, architecture is a theory, an explanation of how to build, a set of ideas about the process of building. In an elegant essay entitled “Why Space Matters for the Liberal Arts,” Mount Holyoke German professor Karen Remmler quotes Emily Dickinson: “I dwell in possibility/A fairer House than Prose/More numerous of windows/Superior for Doors.” Remmler suggests that architecture is about dwelling in possibilities. Its theories are about the entire fabric of human interaction and expression. She reminds us that the theories of architecture help all of us to see our surroundings

through different eyes and to recognize the impact that buildings have on our lives. All citizens, she argues, must be architects in this way, using ideas about building to take responsibility for our surroundings.

Finally, architecture is a practice, the concrete activities of building. Here is a reminder that understanding architecture as calling and theory necessarily leads us to shape our spaces to serve the purposes we intend. I always return to sociologist Ray Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (Paragon House, 1989), which argues that informal public spaces are an integral aspect of "feeling at home." Practicing architecture means creating spaces that serve public purposes. In a different 'practice' vein, my former Wabash College colleague, Steve Webb, has recently suggested that colleges should pay more attention to the connection between space and sound (*LiberalArtsOnline*, 12/13/02), because sound creates space. People gather in spaces to hear each other, thus forming community in the nexus between soundscape and landscape. Thus, the practice of architecture shapes the environments we inhabit and the lives we lead.

My historic college scenes are a daily reminder for me that the architecture of our lives – calling, theory, and practice – has long shaped the places where we find meaning and purpose in the world, forums where we belong, spaces in which we feel at home."

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Several good colleagues have recently joined together to write *One Hope: Re-Membering the Body of Christ* (Augsburg Fortress, 2015). My colleague at Augsburg, Dr. Martha Stortz, and a former Wabash College student, now on the faculty there, Dr. Derek Nelson, were among the six authors—Lutheran and Roman Catholic—who were asked to collaborate on a resource book to guide the way to Lutheran-Catholic unity as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation approaches in 2017.

Two recent books extend my "student ready" college reflections from above. *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni has penned *Where You Go is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania* (Grand Central Publishing, 2015) and Harvard Law professor Lani Guinier has authored *The Tyranny of Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America* (Beacon Press, 2015).

Finally, having heard *New York Times* columnist David Brooks speak a couple of times about his pending book, it has been a treat to read *The Road to Character* (Random House, 2015). Enjoy!

>>Do it anyway<<

Here is a lovely poem and prayer, attributed to Mother Teresa.

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self centered;
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;
It was never between you and them anyway.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Citizenship and work
- Place matters

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